

The Italian Expedition in the Russian Campaign 1941-43: A Pronounced Failure.

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Italian Expedition in the Russian Campaign 1941-43: A Pronounced Failure, by Major Gabriele Guidi, 60 pages.

This monograph investigates the Italian Expedition in the Russian campaign during the Second World War from an operational perspective. It seeks to identify those factors—relevant for practicing operational art—that caused the collapse of the Italian forces in 1943.

Specifically, the monograph identifies three main causes. First, at the political and strategic level, the Italian government did not provide the necessary support to the war in terms of political guidance, economic resources, and societal involvement. Second, at the operational level, in reflecting the widespread lack of resources and the absence of a centralized coordination among the services, the military forces were not able to adequately develop and modernize their structures, weapons, and equipment. Furthermore, an overall poor military culture affected the conduct of the operations. Third, ideological and cultural differences, an overall lack of trust, and the absence of primary coordination mechanisms undermined the relationship between Italian and German commands.

The conclusion of the monograph depicts several lessons for current and future operational planners. The latter have to be ready to properly frame the operational environment, to consider the intangible values involved in the conflict, and to establish efficient coordination mechanisms within a coalition.

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I would consider this monograph as an example of a labor of love. The emotional aspect of this assignment provided the energy and the *leitmotiv* for a one-year effort in searching, reading, and writing. At the same time, the emotional aspect—my early feelings of passion—has left the stage to the rational elements of the mind with the discovery of the strengths and weaknesses of a historical case that presented different perspectives and subsequent interpretations. Thus, this project, in shedding light on one of the dramatic pages of the Italian military history, represents the union of a rationale analysis with the emotions of the heart.

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Acronyms

ARMIR	<i>Armata italiana in Russia</i> (Eighth Army)
CSIR	<i>Corpo di spedizione italiana in Russia</i> (Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia)
OKH	<i>Oberkommando der Heeres</i>
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i>

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Introduction

A coalition is excellent as long as all interests of each member are the same. But in all coalitions, the interests of the allies coincide only up to a certain point. As soon as one of the allies has to make sacrifices for the attainment of a large common objective, one cannot usually count on the coalition's efficacy.

—Helmut Graf von Moltke

First Lieutenant Aurelio Mazzone, First Battery deputy commander, Second Artillery Group, Thirty-Fifth Corps, Italian Eighth Army, watched with trepidation signs of activity across the Don River, north of Stalingrad. It was December 17, 1942, and his battery had been in this area since the beginning of December, providing support to the infantry patrols across the Don. Everyone in his unit and among the infantry knew the Soviets were going to attack. The signs were evident, and those on the front-line heard the enemy moving at night and fought off raiders and skirmishers testing the Italian positions. Those in contact were frantic as the infantry alternated between improving their defenses and fighting off the enemy raids. Of course, the cold, snowy, and windy weather, far worse than anything they had experienced in the Mediterranean, hampered the operations, undermining the morale of the troops. As a result, the health conditions of the Italian soldiers were becoming weak because of the inclement weather and lack of food, winter clothing, and equipment. Mazzone sensed that his seniors expected the attack, but they did not know how to respond and neglected to prepare the defenders for what was to come.¹ In this uncertainty and insidious sense of abandonment, Mazzone and his soldiers continued to dig and support the troops along the river. That night the Soviet attack began with hundreds of mortars, rockets, and artillery shells raining smoke and fire on the Italian positions. Surprised survivors from defending Italian units staggered past the artillery positions, while the senior headquarters ordered them to hold their

¹ Lucio Ceva, *Le Forze Armate* (Turin, Italy: UTET, 1981), 322-325.

position.² That was not possible, and soon all of the other artillery units holding this part of the Don line withdrew, leaving the First Battery isolated. After several hours of the artillery barrage, and taking advantage of the partly frozen Don River, Soviet tank and infantry units moved toward the crumbling Italian positions. Captain Nuto Revelli, commanding the only battery remaining, decided it was time to move the First Battery to the rear. Short of fuel, ammunition, and food, Italian troops moved on foot with few machineguns, rifles, and hand grenades. Almost entirely on foot, the battery rushed to the rear along the Dubowikoff-Orobinski road, leaving artillery pieces, useless vehicles, and part of their dead and wounded comrades in the burning camps. There was no time to rest or pause. After two months of exhausting withdrawal in the Russian steppe, First Lieutenant Mazzone and a few survivors from his battery were eventually able to escape the Soviet encirclement. He was one of the lucky ones.³

On the night of December 16, 1942, as part of Operation Little Saturn, Soviet combat engineers, under cover of a massive artillery barrage, deployed pontoon bridges across the partly frozen Don River.⁴ Then, with waves of tanks and aircraft, the Red Army attacked a stretch of front 30 miles wide on either side of the Don bridgehead at Verkhni Mamon, an area occupied by the Italian Thirty-Fifth Corps. In less than two weeks, with four armies, 370,000 troops, 1,170 armored and light vehicles, and 5,600 artillery pieces—a six-to-one superiority regarding troops, armored vehicles, and artillery—Soviet forces overwhelmed the Italian units.⁵ Weakened by three days of

² Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43* (Rome, Italy: USE, 1977), 329.

³ Aurelio Mazzone, “La Storia non insegna,” *L’Impegno* 4, no. 3 (September 1984): 27-40, accessed October 12, 2016, <http://www.storia900bivc.it/pagine/memoguerra/mazzone384.html>.

⁴ Richard N. Armstrong, *Soviet Operational Deception: The Red Cloak* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1988), 5-6.

⁵ David M. Glantz, *From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations, December 1942 – August 1943* (London, UK: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1991), 65-69; Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943: Dall’impero d’Etiopia alla disfatta* (Milan, Italy: Einaudi, 2008), 389-392; Carlo Vicentini, *Il sacrificio della Julia in Russia* (Udine, Italy: Gaspari Editore, 2006), 15.

attacks and counterattacks, the Italians were unable to regroup, ceding a huge portion of terrain to the Soviets. On December 19, the Italian Second and Thirty-Fifth Corps collapsed. With the withdrawal, the situation worsened. Hundreds of disorganized, leaderless groups of Italian soldiers “were abandoned, on their own, without orders, ammunition, or provisions of food.”⁶ Officers lacked even maps of the areas behind the defensive line as they sought to escape the Soviet encirclement. The limitations of the Italian expedition appeared in all its gravity. Under severe weather conditions, with inadequate equipment and clothing, and without any coordination with higher and adjacent headquarters, Italian forces divided into two groups. The disorganized infantry divisions of the Italian Second and Thirty-Fifth Corps, under massive Soviet attack, withdrew southwest. The Alpini Corps, not involved when the Soviet counteroffensive began, received the order to maintain its position on the Don River. The results of those decisions were dramatic. Encircled by the Soviet forces, the Alpini Corps began a retreat toward the German main defensive lines. At the end of February 1943, after 600 kilometers of withdrawal, out of 3,010 officers and 221,875 troops, the Italian expedition suffered 84,830 deaths and missing, and 29,690 wounded or frostbitten.⁷

The Italian expedition was part of Operation Barbarossa under the German command. On June 22, 1941, Hitler broke the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact signed in August 1939 and launched a massive attack against the Soviet Union. Since the beginning of the war, Hitler had

⁶ Hope Hamilton, *Sacrifice on the Steppe: The Italian Alpine Corps in the Stalingrad Campaign, 1942-1943* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2011), 75.

⁷ According to historian Carlo Vicentini, 25,000 soldiers died in combat or from exhaustion. Furthermore, Russians captured an estimated 70,000 troops. “Since 10,000 of these repatriated after the war, that means 60,000 Italian soldiers died either in the prisoner of war camps or on forced marches or train transports,” Carlo Vicentini, “Dagli archivi russi e’ arrivata la documentazione sui nostri prigionieri di guerra,” paper prepared for the Workshop on “La deportazione italiana durante la seconda guerra mondiale” (Bergamo, Italy: Istituto Bergamasco per la storia della resistenza e dell’eta’ contemporanea, 1997); Hope Hamilton, *Sacrifice on the Steppe*, 304; Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 338-465; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 395.

sought to finalize the end of the Bolshevism in the Soviet Union. Proof of this consuming desire was his declaration of intent to his staff in summer 1940. After the initial successes on the Western Front, his mind shifted to the Eastern Front where he envisioned the invasion of Russia for the following autumn, but the objections of the General Staff hindered his ambitions, delaying the attack until spring 1941.⁸ Thus, Hitler determined the date of the invasion for May 1941, but additional operations in the Balkans, in support of the Italian commitment in the region, obliged the Germans to postpone the attack until the end of June.⁹ To obtain a quick victory against the Soviet Union, the Germans planned to defeat the bulk of the Red Army through a series of encirclements near the Soviet-Polish frontier. Hitler deployed 152 divisions, including nineteen panzer and fifteen motorized infantry divisions, on the Eastern Front, relying on 3,350 tanks, 7,200 artillery pieces, and 2,770 aircraft. The German Army High Command, *Oberkommando der Heeres (OKH)*, with Directive 21, divided the forces into an Army of Norway in the far north and three army groups from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The three army groups moved in diverging directions, toward Leningrad with Army Group North, Moscow with Army Group Center, and Kiev with Army Group South. The area of operations comprised a southern and a northern part divided by the Pripyat Marshes.¹⁰

Barbarossa was a grand coalition operation. In his massive effort to settle the score with the Russians, Hitler involved several other countries, such as Romania, Hungary, and Finland.¹¹ For his

⁸ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1990), 920; Giorgio Bocca, *Storia d'Italia nella guerra fascista* (Milan, Italy: Mondadori, 1969), 319-323.

⁹ David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. Modern War Studies ed. Theodore A. Wilson (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 43.

¹⁰ Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 30-31; Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1952), 513-516; Adolf Hitler, *Fuehrer Directives and Other Top-Level Directives of the German Armed Forces, 1939-1941*, 1948 (Combined Arms Research Digital Library), accessed 6 October 2016, <http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p4013coll8/id/2356/rec/1.>, 199.

¹¹ Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East* (Washington,

part, Mussolini, considering himself the primary ally of the German dictator, was keen to secure an involvement in the campaign. For him, Italian participation as Germany's ally represented an incredible opportunity to achieve his political and strategic objectives.

However, German military authorities sought to keep the Italians out of the war on the Eastern Front. The first reservations began with Hitler himself. In the letter sent on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, on June 21, 1941, the *Führer* vaguely agreed to an Italian contingent on the Eastern Front, but, at the same time, he urged Mussolini to focus the military efforts in the Mediterranean theater, the critical Italian area of operations.¹² Furthermore, the German reservations stemmed from accurate information on the Italian social, political, and economic situation. According to the German intelligence reports, an Italian operation with the Germans on the Eastern Front would provide more disadvantages than advantages. Eventually, despite these reservations, Mussolini's perseverance succeeded.¹³ An Italian force, named the *Corpo di Spedizione in Russia* (CSIR), joined Operation Barbarossa. This corps-sized unit consisted of two infantry divisions, one mobile division, and one artillery group, totaling 62,000 troops, 5,500 vehicles, 148 artillery pieces, and 83 aircraft.¹⁴

Despite the emerging problems in a diverse coalition, in the first year of the conflict in Russian territory, CSIR's contribution was considerable. Italian forces participated in the encirclement of the Soviet forces at Kiev and contributed to capture Stalino in October 1941.¹⁵ For

DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army, 1987), 3-7.

¹² Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943* (Rome, Italy: Bi Classici, 2016), 22 June 1941, 470.

¹³ Ibid., 24 June 1941, 471.

¹⁴ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 71-79, 531-541; Ceva, *Le Forze Armate*, 306, 519-525. MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies. Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-1943* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 115; Ugo Cavallero, *Diario 1940-1943* (Rome, Italy: Ciarrapico Editore, 1984), 30 July 1941.

¹⁵ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 83-148; Richard L. DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers* (Lawrence, KS: University Press

Il Duce—Mussolini’s formal title as the leader of Fascism—the initial successes on the Eastern Front fueled his eagerness to increase the Italian contribution to the operation. Thus, Mussolini recommended committing a second corps-sized unit, but Hitler on several occasions politely declined the offer.¹⁶ This attitude changed when the Soviet counterattack at Moscow on December 1941 inflicted high losses on the German force. Hitler thus issued Directive 41—April 5, 1942—ordering Operation Blue. Its principal objective was the Caucasus region and its major oil fields. As a result, Army Group South and the Italian forces, became the main effort of the German maneuver.¹⁷ The German openness to new contribution allowed Mussolini to commit additional forces. Thus, the CSIR became part of an army-sized unit, now the Italian Eighth Army (*Armata Italiana in Russia – ARMIR*), with 229,000 troops, 16,700 motor vehicles, 977 artillery pieces, 90 heavy antitank guns, 64 aircraft, and 25,000 horses. According to the official reports, “It would mark Italy’s maximum contribution to the Axis war effort.”¹⁸ However, the commitment of this additional corps on the Eastern Front did not allow the Italian forces to turn the tide of the operation because this force presented the German Army with vast differences in terms of doctrine, training, and military culture. These aspects forced the commands of Army Group South to employ them in secondary roles, such as mopping up and securing the flanks.¹⁹ Additionally, Germany’s

of Kansas, 2005), 127; Bocca, *Storia d’Italia nella guerra fascista*, 326-336.

¹⁶ Ciano, *Diario*, 30 June 1941, 472; Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 181-183.

¹⁷ George E. Blau, *The German Campaign in Russia: Planning and Operations, 1940-1942* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 109-142; Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 108-125; Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army, 1968), 15-18.

¹⁸ The Eighth Italian Army – ARMIR relied on three corps: the Thirty-Fifth Army Corps, the Second Army Corps, and the Mountain (Alpini) Corps, in total ten divisions. For a detailed composition see, Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 186-195, 597-631; Ceva, *Le forze armate*, Annex 46, 526-552.

¹⁹ Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, 108-111.

overextended lines of communication impeded a constant flow of resupplies during the advance. This lack of raw materials, fuel, lubricants, and vehicles' spare parts imposed several operational pauses on the German forces, allowing the Soviets to mobilize and regroup. Further, the vast majority of the German Army relied on foot-mobile infantry and horse-drawn artillery and supplies. This aspect forced the mechanized and motorized spearheads to pause while their supporting units caught up. Poor conditions of the roads, a wider-gauge railway system than in Germany, and a never-ending series of modifications of the vehicles negatively affected the maintenance capacity of the mechanized forces. Furthermore, Hitler did not mobilize the German economy. Throughout the war, Germany's lack of petroleum and other raw materials limited production and transportation. Lastly, Hitler underestimated both Stalin's control over the people and the Soviet capability to create additional units for the replacement of the destroyed ones, namely the reserve group of armies constituted east of the Dnepr River.²⁰ As a result, these weaknesses enabled the Red Army to regroup. In the massive counteroffensive in December 1942, the Soviets exploited the weak defensive positions along the Don River. The Italian forces collapsed under the massive Soviet counterattack. The subsequent withdrawal without orders, adequate equipment and weapons, and plans highlighted the significant limitations of the Italian forces.

²⁰ Ibid., 29-30, 160-176.

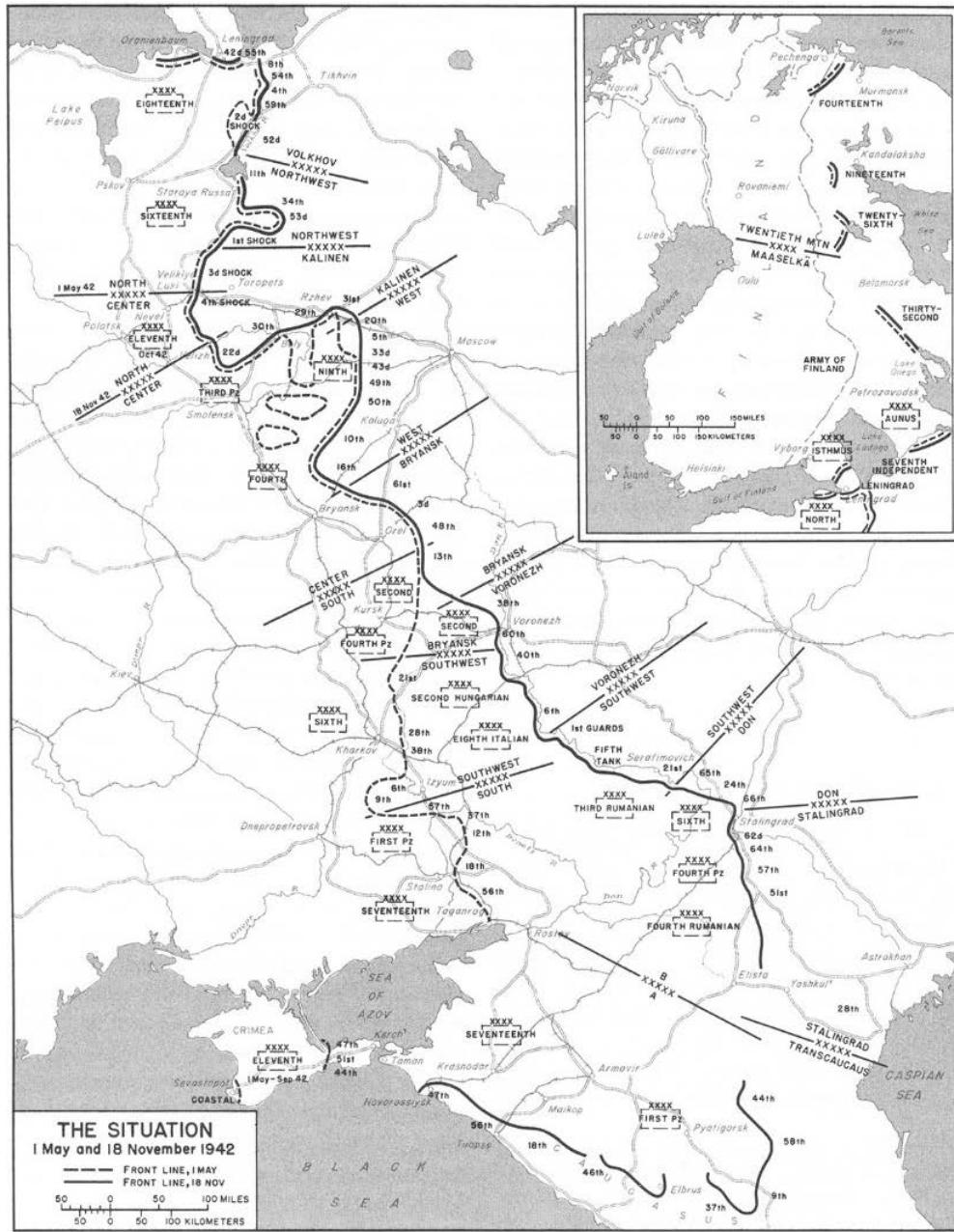


Figure 1. Situation on the Eastern Front between May and November 1942. Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army, 1968), 16.

While numerous accounts in all languages provided insightful accounts of the operations in the Second World War and, in particular, of those that occurred on the Eastern Front, the contribution of the Italian forces in Russia has received scant attention in most books written in English. The reasons are understandable. English-speaking countries, not directly involved on the

Eastern Front, focused their analysis on the painful and eventually victorious experiences in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, Western Europe, or Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the international climate after the war impeded a critical historical evaluation of the conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union. Lastly, foreign scholars were able to access the Soviet archives only several years after the end of the hostilities, limiting *de facto* an objective analysis through the juxtaposition of different perspectives.²¹

In the Italian historiography, the account of the Italian expedition developed with progressively increasing accuracy after the conflict. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Italian Army Historical Office presented two provisional, biased, and inaccurate reports of the expedition, in addition to the war diary of General Giovanni Messe, the former commander of the CSIR. The first report concerned the ARMIR in the years 1942-43. The seventy-page account relied solely on the reports of the Italian officers, limiting the analysis to a few select units. Published in 1947, a second volume dealt with the actions of the CSIR and the ARMIR in the years 1941-42. In this case, due to the force's initial successes, the account provided detailed information on the specific actions, but it lacked accuracy on several other aspects such as the logistics, the strength of the forces, and the morale of the troops.²² Beyond these official papers and the insightful report of General Messe, two significant trends developed in Italy. First, in the 1970s and 1980s, several Italian historians such as Giorgio Rochat and Lucio Ceva began an accurate analysis of the events of the Second World War based on the additional information provided by the national archives of the countries involved in the conflict. Second, numerous former officers and soldiers, especially of

²¹ Bernd Wegner, "The Road to Defeat: The German Campaigns in Russia 1941-43," in *Decisive Campaigns of the Second World War*, ed. John Gooch (London, UK: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1990), 105.

²² Giorgio Rochat, "La campagna di Russia 1941-1943: Rassegna bibliografica," in *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia*, no. 79 (1965): 62-65, accessed October 12, 2016, http://www.italia-resistenza.it/wp-content/uploads/ic/RAV0068570_1965_78-81_12.pdf.

the units that fought on the Eastern Front, recorded their experiences through war diaries and memoirs, adding further emphasis to the emotional and social perspective.²³ On the other hand, from the international perspective, several US historians analyzed Mussolini and the Italian campaigns. While the important works of David Glantz and Earl Ziemke focused on the overall German-Russian conflict in the east, paying scant attention to the Italian contribution, accounts by Richard DiNardo and MacGregor Knox presented several insights into the relationships between Germany and its allies.²⁴ Nevertheless, their analysis spanned the entire Second World War, without focusing on the specific contribution of the Italian forces on the Eastern Front.

Therefore, the question still remains, why did the Italian expedition in the Russian campaign fail? This monograph seeks to overcome the fragmentary and limited accounts of the literature framing the issue by viewing it from the distinct perspective of a contemporary military planner. In this sense, it looks to trace back different and conflicting causes of the Italian failure to match ways and means to achieve the desired ends. From an operational perspective, in the Second World War, the Italian military, lacking a clear political guidance and consequently defined strategic objectives, was not able to correctly identify ways and apply means. The outcomes of these significant limitations were especially evident on the Eastern Front, determining the turning point of the conflict. In this imaginary bridge between the specific Italian historiography and the broad English production related to the overall conflict, the research examines the question and develops the thesis through three sections. Thus, the Italian expedition in the Russian campaign through Operation Barbarossa, and then Operation Blue, failed because Italy, as a nation, lacked the adequate support in terms of political guidance, economic resources, and societal involvement in

²³ Nuto Revelli, *Mussolini's Death March: Eyewitness Accounts of Italian Soldiers on the Eastern Front* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013), xxviii-xxxii, 3-8.

²⁴ Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*; Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin*; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*; DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*.

the conflict. Furthermore, the Italian armed forces reflected the overall lack of resources, scarce cooperation among services, and poor military culture. Finally, ideological and cultural differences, an overall lack of trust, and the absence of primary coordination mechanisms undermined the relationship between Italian and German commands.

National Preparation

According to historian Brian Sullivan, “Italy was simply unprepared for war in 1940.”²⁵ First Lieutenant Mazzone, on the Don River, would have understood the pivotal role of the nation in supporting the armed forces in a conflict, through his suffering and deprivation. The lack of resources, political guidance, and societal support profoundly influenced the conduct of the operations of the Italian units during the entire war and especially on the Eastern Front. Economic resources were lacking, but they were not the only justification for the dramatic outcomes of war. Mazzone, as the other soldiers sent to Russia, Greece, and North Africa did not completely understand the reasons why Italians should have fought in such disparate theaters far from home. In this sense, political guidance was absent. Mussolini and Fascism based their actions on an ambiguous foreign policy, according to an opportunistic vision. Consequently, without the subsequent strategic objectives, the military leadership was not able to establish clear conditions, operational goals, and the necessary means to achieve the desired end state. Finally, the social structure of Italy, suffering from the erratic dictatorship, presented the worst possible situation. The Italian population did not completely understand and favor a war whose objective resided in ideological and political opportunism.

²⁵ Brian R. Sullivan, “The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-1940,” in *Military Effectiveness: Vol. 2 Interwar Period*, ed. Allen R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 170.

Italy presented several shortfalls with particular regard to its economy. The country was predominantly agricultural, and its economy displayed a deficiency in raw materials, manufacturing capacity, and capital. Furthermore, the lack of a scientific-technological base negatively affected the development of a professional workforce in fields that would have been highly profitable for the nation.²⁶ The invasion of Ethiopia in 1934, the subsequent pacification process of the Italian empire in that area, and the support provided to the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War stretched the thin military resources of a still limited Italian budget. According to Felice Guarneri, Italian Minister of Exchange and Currency, the Italian government was in bankruptcy by 1938.²⁷

One of the serious weaknesses of Italy arose from the insufficient supplies available to sustain a war. Italy possessed only limited deposits of vital raw materials. In 1938, a comparison with the other European countries showed the critical situation of the Italians. Italy produced barely a million metric tons of hard coal and imported additional 12.1 million tons, whereas France produced 47.6 million and Germany 186.2 million tons. Furthermore, Italy produced 2.3 million tons of steel, while France produced 6.1 million, Britain 10.6 million, and Germany 22.7 million tons. Without domestic petroleum production, Italian imports were up to 2 million tons in 1939.²⁸

Another problem sprang from the Italian education system, which failed to develop scientists, engineers, and specialized workers needed to expand the domestic industry. In the years 1939-40, of the over 550,000 secondary school students, only 29 percent received a scientific or technical education. In the same period, only 11,648 university students out of 85,535 majored in engineering, science, or mathematics. In the late 1930s, because of limited development of the

²⁶ Ibid., 169-174. Lucio Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 258-270.

²⁷ Ciano, *Diaro*, 6 February 1938, 65; MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 30.

²⁸ B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1975), 365-366, 400-401, 413, 419, 467-468.

domestic industry, nearly 50 percent of Italian engineers remained unemployed.²⁹ In this context, the industrialists had minimal influence. Few of them profited from the Fascist expansionism, especially in the Balkans, but overall the effects of the Great Depression led to state holding company control of several sectors of heavy industry. Therefore, industries' performance depended on their usefulness to the regime and the subsequently intertwined favoritism rather than their real effectiveness.³⁰ Italy's aggregate social and economic position, synthesized by its total industrial potential, in 1938 amounted to scarcely more than a fifth of that of its German ally.³¹

As a result of these considerations, Mussolini warned Hitler that Italy would be ready for a major conflict not earlier than 1943, and even this assumption was too optimistic. Mussolini sought to gain time, precisely three years, to recover from the interventions in Libya and Ethiopia, where half a million troops fought.³² Furthermore, Italy had to sustain additional efforts domestically. *Il Duce* sought to complete the relocation of several war industries from the north to the south, increase incomes through the Italian Exposition of 1942, and pacify the relationship between Nazism and the Church, through increased familiarization among the Axis' peoples. Finally, the armed forces needed to renovate the fleet and the heavy artillery, which had become obsolete in comparison with the other European countries.³³

²⁹ Marzio Barbagli, *Disoccupazione intellettuale e sistema scolastico in Italia (1859-1973)* (Bologna, Italy: Universale Paperbacks Mulino, 1974), 204, 213-214, 255-256.

³⁰ Roland Sarti, *Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy, 1919-1940: A Study in the Expansion of Private Power under Fascism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 127.

³¹ Paul Bairoch, "Europe's Gross National Product, 1800-1975," and "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History*, 5:2 (1976), 297, and 11:2 (1982), 299-302.

³² Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (Rome, Italy: Libreria dello Stato, 1952), series 8, vol. 12, no. 59, p. 49-51.

³³ Ibid., series 8, vol. 12, no. 130, p. 112.

Although Hitler replied that in general, he was in full agreement with the Italian considerations, he indeed followed his own agenda, invading Poland on September 1, 1939.³⁴ The ensuing economic situation became even more dramatic, as the British blockade of German exports threatened to deprive the Italian ally of Ruhr coal and would induce Mussolini's regime into dependence on western countries. Only then did Hitler's decision to supply the entire Italian requirement, namely 1,000,000 tons a month, by rail through Switzerland and Austria, provide the vital support to the Italian economy. As a result, when the Germans attacked Poland, Italian industrial raw materials, including coal, were still entirely insufficient. Italy's industrial base and supply of specialized labor remained limited, both overall and in relation to the war efforts.³⁵

Beyond the significant shortfalls in the Italian economy, the political aspect rested on a weak compromise of Mussolini and the Fascist regime with several actors, namely the monarchy, the military leadership, the industrial and financial elites, and the Vatican. As a matter of fact, he dealt with numerous centers of institutional interests that he could not fully control. To Heinrich Himmler, Mussolini explained that in Rome there were "three of us; myself, the King, and the Pope."³⁶ Although, in March 1938, Mussolini proclaimed himself as "the First Marshal of the Empire" with the idea of definitely overcoming the influence of the monarchy, *Il Duce* never succeeded in his plan. Indeed, King Victor Emmanuel III was favorable to foreign expansionism, but for Mussolini, he remained an obstacle and a potential threat to his demagogical ideas.³⁷

Furthermore, the monarchical loyalties and caste spirit of the military remained a constant threat during the dictatorship. Specifically, since the emergence of the Fascist movement, Italy

³⁴ Ciano, *Diario*, 11 August – 3 September 1939, 281-296; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 16; Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 42-43.

³⁵ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 30-33, 69-74, 82-84.

³⁶ Ibid., 9.

³⁷ Ciano, *Diario*, 2 April 1938, 90.

suffered from the erratic relationship between the Fascist Party and the military leadership. The first attempt at promoting civil control over the military occurred in 1922 when Mussolini promised the military an “unprecedented autonomy” in return of its neutrality toward the Fascist coup. Granting to all the state’s organizations—ranging from the educational to the health system—a certain degree of autonomy, Fascism wanted in return the acceptance of the rules of the dictatorship. Thus, the governmental institutions were able to maintain their organizational policies, regulations, and privileges while limiting their involvement in political matters. With regard to the armed forces, the military leadership, in return for autonomy of decision, assured their neutrality in the internal political arena. In this sense, Mussolini maintained the power to nominate the top-level senior leadership, but he had to respect the military rules, namely choosing the most senior and authoritative generals.³⁸ Furthermore, the military leadership saw in the emergent regime the possibility of modernizing the Italian society and, consequently, the armed forces. This dichotomy of desired autonomy and progressive modernization opened the route to an increasing control of the military forces by the Fascist government, but the ranks never completely embraced its dictates. Indoctrination and even Party membership did not prevent the officer corps from sensing the monarchical esprit de corps. In fact, although Mussolini in 1940 could exercise a substantial power in the military domain, the ultimate power resided in the King and the senior generals of the *Regio Esercito*.³⁹

Additionally, Mussolini’s erratic conception of foreign policy hindered the development of a coherent political concept. Several historians condemned Mussolini’s foreign policy. One of the leading Italian historians, Gaetano Salvemini, considered *Il Duce* “an irresponsible improviser, half

³⁸ Sullivan, “The Italian Armed forces, 1918-1940,” 169; Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 147-148.

³⁹ Knox, *Common Destiny*, 97-100.

madman, half criminal.”⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Mussolini’s diplomacy relied on a series of seductive improvisations for the purposes of domestic propaganda. This interpretation dominated Italian scholarship until the 1970s, when the Italian government eventually released official documents. Similarly, contemporary international writers such as the British journalist Elizabeth Wiskemann did not challenge this interpretation of Mussolini’s foreign policy.⁴¹

Once the official documentation became available in the 1970s, historians subjected these interpretations to revision. In the light of new documentation, Mussolini’s foreign policy acquired a different meaning. *Il Duce* conceived war as the pivotal element of Fascism and believed the subsequent Fascist remolding of the Italian character would occur through the war. He sought by force of arms to make Italy a greater power with an empire from Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf.⁴² In this context, the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 and the following intervention in the Spanish Civil War represented a way to enhance the domestic prestige of Fascism, the confirmation of the desired development of the new Italian imperialism.⁴³ The necessity to expand geopolitical interests emerged from the analysis of the combination of resource dependence and geography. Specifically, the real threat derived from the choke points at Gibraltar and Suez rather than the neighboring countries. Four-fifths of Italian imports came by sea from outside the Mediterranean, making the position of Italy extremely vulnerable.⁴⁴ As a result, Mussolini’s mission became the conquest of the Mediterranean. “A nation that has no free access to the sea cannot be considered a free nation; a

⁴⁰ Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (London, UK: Victor Gollancz, 1953); 10; Knox, *Common Destiny*, 116.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis: A History of the Relations between Hitler and Mussolini* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1949), 339-346.

⁴² Ciano, *Diarario*, 13 November 1937, 33; Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 29, ed. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Florence, Italy: La Fenice, 1951), 403-405.

⁴³ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 12.

⁴⁴ Chief of naval staff memorandum, 23 October 1921, in Giovanni Bernardi, *Il disarmo navale tra le due guerre mondiali (1919-1939)* (Rome, Italy: Ufficio storico della Marina Militare, 1975), 46.

nation that has no free access to the oceans cannot be considered a great power. Italy must become a great power.”⁴⁵ In this context, Mussolini pursued his foreign policy through the signing of economic agreements with Albania, and several war plans against small territories and states in the Mediterranean such as Corsica, Tunis, Malta, and Cyprus. Finally, before orienting the final efforts against Yugoslavia and France, the last obstacles in the Mediterranean, Mussolini focused on the Horn of Africa, specifically on Ethiopia, in order to establish a base for follow-on operations in the Suez Canal and definitely gain the control of Red Sea.⁴⁶ However, the imperialist foreign policy of Mussolini, in addition to the huge support to the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War, exacerbated the still limited national resources, both economically and militarily. To some extent, the repercussions of this reinvigorated imperialism would negatively affect the position of Italy in the Second World War, especially on the Eastern Front, representing *de facto* a drastic shift in terms of foreign policy and military strategy.

At the same time, Mussolini confronted the Vatican influence. The Church enthusiastically favored the Fascist expeditions in Ethiopia and Albania, but the involvement of Italy in a European war clearly assumed an excessive dimension. To some extent, a victory or a defeat would inexorably change the internal balance of power. A victory would favor the image of Mussolini, limiting the freedom of action of the clergy; a defeat would compromise the Lateran Pacts, leading to the same outcomes. As a result, the Vatican sought to impose its influence and restrain the ambitions of *Il Duce*, maintaining the status quo.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, 51-52; Shepard B. Clough and Salvatore Saladino, *A History of Modern Italy: Documents, Readings, and Commentary* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1968), 507.

⁴⁶ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 40, 96; Knox, *Common Destiny*, 118-143.

⁴⁷ Charles F. Delzell, “Pius XII, Italy, and the Outbreak of War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 4 (October 1967), 137-161.

Fully aware of the internal limits of his dictatorship, Mussolini acted consequently. Beyond the official “non-belligerent” statements, Mussolini avoided entering the war and, in pursuing the strategy of the “decisive weight,” he waited for the development of the situation. The strategy of the decisive weight, “*del peso determinante*,” was not new in Italian history. Since the unification in 1861, the Italian government, acting under the strategy of the decisive weight, based its entry into war upon the national interests in that particular event. Participating on the winning side at the right moment and consequently, at the table of the decisions, Italian leaders sought to attain their strategic objectives in a short and focused effort, ignoring popular sentiment and economic issues. Although the strategy of decisive weight during the First World War was neither rapid nor decisive, determining a long and bloody effort, the final success convinced Mussolini to pursue the same approach in the second world conflict.⁴⁸ It was not neutrality as twenty-five years before. Mussolini preferred the term “non-belligerence” in order to reassure the German counterparts that Italy would have promptly acted on Hitler’s request in accordance with the available means.

Despite several conflicting interests, Mussolini was able to envision a foreign policy that presented elements of continuity with his predecessors and elements of novelty concerning the geographical, ideological, and domestic implications of his actions. In addition to these external influences and constraints, Mussolini had to fight his own demons. In this sense, he demonstrated an erratic character. He had a bad attitude in dealing with individuals. On several occasions, he agreed with the last person he talked to, a behavior that resulted in contradictory decisions and frequent paralysis. Furthermore, he forced his subordinates to fight each other, remaining above the dispute as a supreme arbiter. Although creating competition presented doubtless advantages in

⁴⁸ Brian Sullivan, “The Strategy of the Decisive Weight: Italy 1882-1922,” in *Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 307-351; Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 35; DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 31.

stimulating new ideas and subsequently better decisions, the evident lack of cohesion of its elites and an evident economic weakness led to creating additional confusion and paralysis. In addition to vanity, Mussolini distrusted his subordinates. Especially during the years of war, Mussolini removed, without warning and explanation, most of his ministers and commanders. The result was dramatic, as the replacement of experienced administrators with unqualified acquaintances contributed to additional, systematic confusion in the governance of the country.⁴⁹

The social sphere was even more problematic. Beyond the political and economic deficiencies, Mussolini acted under the restriction of an Italian society that was largely agrarian.⁵⁰ Over half the population of approximately forty-three million were peasants. In comparison, the German population, in 1939, represented 42 percent for industry and 26 percent for agriculture. Consequently, in the late 1930s, Italy was still thirty to fifty years behind Germany in becoming an industrial society.⁵¹ Furthermore, most of the Italian society was illiterate. The 1931 census registered an illiteracy rate of 20.9 percent among those over six years of age: roughly 10 percent in the north, 21 percent in the center, and 39 percent in the south and islands. The few educated elite worked for the state bureaucracy, rather than the technical and industrial fields. Only a limited portion of the population in the north and center of Italy could speak the Italian language. Mutually incomprehensible or barely comprehensible dialects were present in the tens of thousands of villages of Italy.⁵² In this context, the Church continued to exercise a predominant role in the

⁴⁹ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 5-8.

⁵⁰ John Gooch, "Clausewitz Disregarded: Italian Military Thought and Doctrine, 1815-1943," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 9, no.2 (June 1986): 313.

⁵¹ SVIMEZ – Associazione per lo sviluppo dell'industria nel mezzogiorno, *Un secolo di statistiche italiane, 1861-1961* (Rome, Italy: ITS, 1961), 795.

⁵² MacGregor Knox, "The Sources of Italy's Defeat in 1940: Bluff or Institutional Incompetence?" in *German Nationalism and the European Response* ed. Carole Fink, Isabel V. Hull, and MacGregor Knox (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 255-256.

village community, reinforcing the peasantry's resistance to modernity. Thus, after centuries of semi-colonial Bourbon rule in the south, and of aristocratic and clerical hegemony in the north, Italian society appeared corrupted and not keen on the regime's attempts of mobilization. National patriotism was significant, especially among the educated, but regional affiliation was even stronger.⁵³ Consequently, a strong civic consciousness was lacking, with the concept of service of the state for higher national purposes partially developed in the cities and in the north, where the traditions of the former Piedmont state and its military persisted beyond the unification.⁵⁴

Finally, an additional source of restraint upon Mussolini was Italian public opinion. Especially after the Ethiopian adventure, the regime's propaganda was less successful in keeping the nation united. Despite the genuine appeal of Fascist expansionism, moreover, intervention in Spain, the anti-Jewish campaign, and the alliance with Germany were not popular. According to historian MacGregor Knox, "increasing economic difficulties caused distress and complaint. The prospect of general war, both in 1938 and 1939, horrified Italian opinion."⁵⁵

Implications of the Italian political, economic, and societal aspects emerged in the controversial decision of Mussolini to join the Germans in Operation Barbarossa. The relationship between Italy and the Soviet Union, namely between Fascism and Bolshevism developed along a tortuous path. Mussolini followed an erratic approach toward the Soviet Union. One of the first major European countries to recognize the Soviet regime, in 1933, Italy signed a friendship and nonaggression treaty with Russia, leading to the granting of economic resources such as the supply

⁵³ Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), 10.

⁵⁴ Lucio Ceva and Andrea Curami, *La meccanizzazione dell'esercito italiano dalle origini al 1943*, Vol. 1 (Rome, Italy: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1989), 451; Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 8-9.

⁵⁵ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 14.

of fuel in the Ethiopian campaign. However, in 1939, Mussolini changed his mind. Although he viewed the Russo-German alliance as a positive element at preventing a close relationship between Russia and the West, *Il Duce* denounced the Russian military expansionism in Finland. After friendship and trade, and beyond the fear of the expansionism of Bolshevism in Western Europe, Mussolini would not tolerate Stalin replacing him in the German alliance.⁵⁶

On the German side, Russia represented for Hitler the centerpiece of his overall strategy. Conquering the Soviet Union would enable his desired isolation of Britain, unlimited economic resources, especially in the area west of the Urals, and most important, the destruction of the “Jewish Bolshevism,” the real enemy of the German race.⁵⁷ For his part, Mussolini was keen to secure an Italian involvement, although Italy had no real interest regarding a possible operation in the Soviet Union. The Italian dictator repeatedly expressed the necessity of playing a role on the Eastern Front in order to share the victory in the postwar settlement, namely applying the strategy of the decisive weight.⁵⁸ As a result, Italy lacked basic elements of national support. From a political perspective, despite a plethora of actors with different interests, Mussolini’s decision to join Operation Barbarossa definitely deviated from the Mediterranean-centered strategy. This shift would have affected negatively the military forces in terms of objectives, equipment, and morale. From the economic perspective, the scarcity of raw materials and a poor industrial base would have exacerbated the difficulties in the Soviet environment. Additionally, the lack of enthusiasm for fighting in such a distant theater would have crushed the already low morale of the troops. These

⁵⁶ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 63-67; Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1982), 182; J. Calvitt Clarke III, *Russia and Italy against Hitler: The Bolshevik-Fascist Rapprochement of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991), 172-178; G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 15.

⁵⁷ DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 92.

⁵⁸ Richard L. DiNardo, “The Dysfunctional Coalition: The Axis Powers and the Eastern Front in World War II,” *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (October 1996): 727; Mario Fenyo, “The Allied Axis Armies and Stalingrad,” *Military Affairs* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1965): 60.

general considerations on the political, economic, and social aspects of the nation would have had dramatic implications for the Russian campaign.

Military Preparation

From a general perspective, the political, economic, and societal characteristics represent the overarching framework in which the armed forces derive their strengths and weaknesses. In the Italian case, during the Second World War, these aspects constituted the primary elements of weakness though other operational conditions played a significant role. On the eve of the conflict, the Italian armed forces faced several organizational issues. In particular, in reflecting the widespread lack of resources in terms of shares of the national budget and the absence of a centralized coordination among the services, the military forces were not able to adequately develop and modernize structures, weapons, and equipment. Furthermore, an overall poor military culture in terms of military doctrine and analysis of the lessons of previous combat experiences affected the military. These elements constituted typical drawbacks for the Italian military in the entire conflict, but due to the alien environment on the Eastern Front, their presence amplified their negative effects on that particular battlefield.

Because of the overarching financial constraints, the share of the national income dedicated to the armed forces fluctuated between 20 and 25 percent in the 1920s and 1930s, while it increased up to 40 percent only in 1940.⁵⁹ Beyond these percentages, the Italian military expenditure, in absolute terms, was similar to that of France and three-fourths that of Britain, but it presented several issues. First, until the late 1930s, a conspicuous portion of the military expenditure regarded

⁵⁹ Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 274-280. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, Table A.2.2, 294-296; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, 154-157.

the expenses of replacing assets depleted in the Ethiopian Theater and the intervention in Spain.

Second, because of the late expansion of the military budget, the effects of this increase became effective late in the war, limiting *de facto* modernization of military capabilities.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the limited financial resources encountered an additional strategic constraint. Mussolini's vision affected the redistribution of the armaments budget among the services. Specifically, in conceiving the Italian decisive action being possible only "at sea, in the air, in North Africa, and in the Balkans," he assigned priority to the Navy and the Air Force, the services whose capacities would have set the conditions for domination in the Mediterranean.⁶¹ In reality, the Army, due to its senior status, its closeness to the monarchy, and its pivotal role in maintaining the public order of the regime, received the greatest part of the financial budget until the end of the 1930s.⁶² Eventually, a redistribution of the financial resources to the services occurred, but the overall budget was not enough to deal with the aftermath of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War, and with an extensive modernization.

In addition to limited financial resources, Mussolini failed to coordinate and direct in a harmonized way "weapons research, equipment procurement and production, and manpower mobilization."⁶³ Although he became the supreme commander of the armed forces after June 1940, no unified direction that could coordinate the war economy emerged until summer 1941. Specifically, beyond the evident lack of industrial and technical capabilities, the armed forces failed to establish an efficient centralized organization that could harmonize the different and conflicting

⁶⁰ Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 276; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 23-27.

⁶¹ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 18; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, series 8, vol. 12, no. 59, p. 49-51 and series 9, vol. 3, no. 669, p. 576-579.

⁶² Ministero del Tesoro – Ragioneria Generale dello Stato, *Il bilancio dello Stato negli esercizi finanziari dal 1930-31 al 1941-42* (Rome, Italy: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1951), 257, 407.

⁶³ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 35.

necessities of the military. Indeed, in 1935, Mussolini created a General Commissariat for War Production to coordinate raw material allocation—but not labor or armaments contracts—based on a rational, centralized basis. Indeed, the General Commissariat accomplished little. It had no control over medium-term armaments planning. Furthermore, the services' undersecretaries maintained control of procurement, causing inter-service disputes that led to constant delays. Until early 1943, the three services themselves controlled weapons development and production contracts with industrial companies without any coordination or control over the limited raw materials.⁶⁴ In this sense, war production did not rely on a few standardized types of skilled labor. The General Commissariat managed a variety of weapons from several small and inefficient plants of artisans. As a result, poor-quality materials, lack of research and testing, and various changing specifications from the military resulted in unreliable or even unusable equipment.⁶⁵

Despite these limitations, the military sought to modernize itself during the interwar period. The Army established an active program of research and development in the armored field. The Italian General Staff created an armored corps in 1938, and in the spring of 1939, an armored division operated in Albania. Thus, the Army was able to analyze the potential of armored warfare, and adapt its doctrine to the new requirements. Unfortunately, the Ethiopian campaign, the Spanish Civil War, and the preparation for the impending conflict strained the limited economic resources. Consequently, the country was not able to effectively apply the results of the research and development programs, limiting the Italian military performance in comparison with other

⁶⁴ Fortunato Minniti, "Aspetti organizzativi del controllo sulla produzione bellica in Italia (1923 – 1943)," *Clio* 13, no. 4 (October – December 1977), 305-340; Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo, *Verbali delle riunioni tenute dal capo di Stato Maggiore Generale*, vol. 1 (Rome, Italy: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1983-1985), 23.

⁶⁵ Carlo Favagrossa, *Perche' perdemmo la guerra: Mussolini e la produzione bellica* (Milan, Italy: Rizzoli, 1947), 32-43; Clough, *The Economic History of Modern Italy*, 260.

European countries.⁶⁶ The effects of these limitations were evident on the Eastern Front. Italy's lack of military modernity in terms of organization, equipment, and capabilities was evident in the immobility and inefficiency of the Italian expeditionary forces, CSIR and ARMIR.

Composed of three divisions, totaling 62,000 troops, General Messe's CSIR, presented several shortfalls.⁶⁷ First, the standard Italian division had a different strength in comparison with the German one. Composed of only two regiments instead of three, the Italian division was slightly larger than a reinforced brigade.⁶⁸ Furthermore, although supposed to be completely motorized, they lacked enough vehicles to transport troops in offensive operations, especially when conducted in combination with the German units. Thus, the limited number of vehicles allowed the transportation of only one division, reducing synchronization, increasing the logistic flow during the operations, and exhausting the troops. It is emblematic that the *Torino* Division had to march for fifty days before joining the German units on the Eastern Front.⁶⁹ Additionally, the expeditionary force did not operate according to its authorized organization. Indeed, each division received as a reinforcement, a black shirt Legion, a weapon support battalion, and a mortar battalion. This augmentation enhanced combat effectiveness, but at the same time, it negatively affected unity of command and consequently synchronization and coordination of the activities.

Further, the capabilities of the units were inadequate for the missions assigned to the Italian expedition. For instance, the Third *Celere* Division was appropriate for reconnaissance activities in

⁶⁶ John J. T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 4-6.

⁶⁷ For the composition of the CSIR, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 531-541.

⁶⁸ Francesco Valori, *Gli italiani in Russia: La campagna dello CSIR e dell'ARMIR* (Milan, Italy: Bietti, 1967), 39-42.

⁶⁹ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 71-82, 95.

a mountainous environment, but in the flat Russian terrain, it lacked the necessary armored and motorized vehicles to catch up with the German units. Concerning weaponry and armored vehicles, the Italian forces relied on artillery pieces that were of poor quality and obsolete. The Italians had only one group of sixty light tanks and inadequate, limited antitank and antiaircraft weapons to counter the Soviets. Even the rifles of 1891, despite their sturdiness, presented severe limits when juxtaposed with the Russian automatic ones. The few machineguns available in the Italian units lost their effectiveness when used under the severe conditions of the Russian weather, and the 20,000 mules were useless in the frozen Russian steppe.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, with the additional forces made available for the ARMIR, the situation did not improve. Although the strength of the expeditionary force increased by 369 percent, the equipment and weaponry increased only by 300 percent, and the air power, in absolute terms, decreased by 21 percent. The ARMIR constantly relied on limited armored and motorized vehicles, and the additional forces on the Eastern Front conducted secondary tasks, especially mopping-up activities. Thus, undermanned divisions, lack of reserve, and scarce equipment remained constant despite the deployment of more than 200,000 troops on the battlefield.⁷¹

Lastly, the extreme weather conditions represented an additional element of criticality. For mitigating the effects of the weather and of poor quality lubricant, much of the limited fuel was necessary to keep the vehicles in motion and to ignite a fire under the machineguns. Consequently, when the fuel inevitably ran out, frozen vehicles and weapons lost their effectiveness. As a result, Italian troops had to march for long distances, exhausting the morale of the soldiers and slowing down the pace of the operations.⁷²

⁷⁰ Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 181-183, 187-188, 195, 586-589.

⁷¹ Ibid., 149-151, 194-196, 632-637.

⁷² Hope, *Sacrifice on the Steppe*, 6-9; Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni*

In addition to limited resources and the consequent shortfalls of adequate structures, weapons, and equipment, one of the most significant impediments to Italian military effectiveness was the absence of an adequate military culture, in particular, military doctrine. The passive participation in previous conflicts hampered the Army in effectively adapting doctrine to the new warfare's necessities. In this sense, the Second World War presented a different kind of warfare from the past. Italian forces operated in a coalition in which Germans applied a war of movement and maneuver characterized by powerful, short-time actions. Conversely, the missed opportunity of studying military thinkers such as Carl von Clausewitz and Helmuth von Moltke, and the subsequent limited planning processes emphasized defensive warfare and fortification, proving inadequate in mobile war.⁷³ With the advent of Fascism and military thinkers such as Emilio Grazioli and Emilio Canevari, the military sought to reform the doctrine from a defensive warfare based on quantity to an offensive one based on quality. However, limited intellectual curiosity and internal debate exacerbated the difficulties in adapting the Italian doctrine to the new warfare.⁷⁴

Under the German command on the Eastern Front, these doctrinal limitations played a significant role. Although the Italian military relied on defensive warfare, Mussolini placed the Italian forces in the middle of a mobile charge in the Soviet territory. This aspect exacerbated the limited resources of the armed forces, since doctrinally the Italian military could have been capable of devoting sufficient resources to either Russia or North Africa, but it could not sustain both the theaters.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the Italian forces, from the senior officers to the troops, lacked the initiative

delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43, 136, 149-151.

⁷³ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 32-34; John Gooch, *Army, State, and Society in Italy, 1870-1915* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 170-171; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 169-173.

⁷⁴ John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy 1922-1940* (Cambridge, MA: University of Cambridge Press, 2007), 208-211.

⁷⁵ DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 165; DiNardo, "The Dysfunctional Coalition," 718.

to overcome the limitations imposed by the scarce logistic and technical means. This aspect was in contrast with the basic German military doctrine, which emphasized improvisation and initiative as pivotal elements in conducting modern war—*Auftragstaktik*.⁷⁶ In this sense, German military leaders such as General Hermann Hoth, commander of the Fourth Panzer Army, blamed coalition partners for failing to make use of improvisations, such as employing field artillery in an antitank role, to enhance performance effectively with the limited resources on the Eastern Front. Although the Italian Army professed the cult of obedience from the enlisted men to the commanding generals, which discouraged initiative and improvisation in battle, the Italian forces encountered other limitations.⁷⁷ In this particular case, General Hoth overlooked the fact that the means to conduct antitank defenses were also in short supply and Italian military doctrine had never emphasized this approach to warfare.⁷⁸

Despite these doctrinal and cultural limitations, Italian forces employed in the few defensive battles on the Eastern Front during the first year were able to perform well.⁷⁹ They participated in the great encirclement of the Soviets at Kiev, taking 12,000 prisoners, and they played a significant role in the seizure of Stalino in October 1941.⁸⁰ Conversely, on the Don River, all the limitations of the Axis coalition, and specifically of the ARMIR, were evident. Along the

⁷⁶ Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 170-172.

⁷⁷ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 30; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 176.

⁷⁸ Williamson Murray, “Does Military Culture Matter?” *Orbis* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 139; MacGregor Knox, “The First World War and Military Culture: Continuity and Change in Germany and Italy,” in *Imperial Germany Revisited. Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*, ed. Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp (Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2011), 216; DiNardo, “Dysfunctional Coalition,” 718-721.

⁷⁹ Giovanni Messe, *La Guerra al Fronte Russo* (Milan, Italy: Rizzoli, 1964), 124-125, 156-161; J. Lee Ready, *The Forgotten Axis* (London, UK: McFarland, 1987), 147; DiNardo, “Dysfunctional Coalition,” 727; Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 308.

⁸⁰ DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 124-129.

Don River, with an assigned front of 270 kilometers, the Italians sought to conduct a strong static defense. The Italian doctrine at that time prescribed that a division should have covered a 3-5 kilometer sector. On the Eastern Front, especially in the portion where the Soviet counterattack occurred on December 16, 1942, two Italian divisions were responsible for more than sixty kilometers.⁸¹ With only ten divisions, the desire to be strong everywhere precluded the formation of mobile reserves. As a result, the overstretched defensive line, lack of mobile reserves, and several German units re-directed to Stalingrad led to an unfavorable combat ratio against the Soviet forces on December 16, 1942, reducing the chance to resist the Red Army for long.⁸²

An additional cultural limitation was evident in the scarce analysis of the lessons of previous conflicts and in particular of the first combat experiences in the Second World War. The Italian officer corps, backed by the monarchy and regulated by a seniority system of promotion, showed little interest in developing studies of previous combat experiences, especially under Fascism. The regime negatively affected internal debates related to doctrinal and technical issues. Specifically, through strict regulations, military leadership applied a preventive censorship on papers and articles on military matters in addition to a limited circulation of foreign magazines. This lack of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking represented one of the significant defects of the armed forces, especially in the interwar period where the Ethiopian experience and the intervention in the Spanish Civil War should have provided numerous insights into the emergent warfare.⁸³ Although the military sought to analyze, learn, and adapt to new ideas regarding armored and mechanized warfare, the subsequent internal discussion displayed a superficial analysis in order

⁸¹ Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 213-217, 453-463; Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 356-364.

⁸² Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 111-113.

⁸³ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 169-177.

to avoid the regime's censorship. Thus, Italy, under Fascism, missed the opportunity to modernize itself through innovators and beneficial debates. Although the experiences in Ethiopia and Spain amplified the nationalist propaganda, the subsequent superficial military analysis of both the interventions led to confirming improperly the validity of vehicles such as the useless 3.5-ton L3 FIAT-Ansaldo, the anachronistic FIAT CR42 biplane, the inadequate Breda Ba65 ground attack aircraft, and the unreliable M13/1940, M14/1941, and M15/1942 medium tanks.⁸⁴

To some extent, the Italian military failed to examine the lessons from the first year on the Eastern Front. Although the CSIR constantly reported to the higher commands in Italy the numerous issues on the battlefield, the Italian forces did not receive adequate equipment and materials for the Russian winter. Individual equipment lacked winter boots and padded suits. Inadequate lubricants impeded motor vehicles and machineguns from operating. Even the 20,000 mules, extremely effective in a mountainous environment, were useless in the Russian steppe. Lastly, lack of tracked vehicles, snow blowers, and sleds in the second year of the Russian campaign demonstrated the scarce attention of the Italian commands in analyzing the lessons of the first year and consequently adapting to the new necessities.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, when the military leadership in Rome comprehended the need for additional armored and motorized vehicles, the solution was even worse. Instead of provisioning armored and motorized vehicles, General Ugo Cavallero, Italian Chief of the General Staff, increased the march rate of the infantry units from eighteen to forty kilometers daily.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ferruccio Botti and Virgilio Ilari, *Il pensiero militare italiano dal primo al secondo dopoguerra* (Rome, Italy: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1985), 118-135; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 41; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 172.

⁸⁵ Ceva, *Le Forze Armate*, 308-315.

⁸⁶ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 182; Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 305-308; Ciano, *Diario*, 22 October 1941, 491.

In conclusion, on the eve of the conflict, the Italian military displayed significant organizational issues. Specifically, limited resources in terms of shares of the national budget and the absence of a centralized coordination among the services hindered the development and the modernization of structures, weapons, and equipment. Further, an overall poor military culture in terms of doctrine and analysis of the lessons of previous combat experiences affected the military. These elements played a pivotal role particularly in the alien environment on the Eastern Front. A few enlightened field commanders such as General Messe, CSIR commander, were perfectly aware of the situation. In a conversation with Mussolini, he opposed the deployment of the ARMIR on the Eastern Front. Issues related to the strength, equipment, and logistics should have been significant lessons learned during the first year in the Soviet territory and sufficient arguments to negate the implementation of the expedition. *Il Duce*, despite General Messe's recommendations, followed his own agenda. ARMIR would encounter the same problems, but amplified by the consisting of an army rather than a corps. In addition to these severe limitations, the relationship with the German counterpart would exacerbate their effects.⁸⁷

Coalition Politics

A coalition can achieve significant results as long as the interests of each member converge toward the same objectives. When the interests do not coincide and one of the allies has to sacrifice part of its benefits for a broader objective, coalitions fail. Effective coordination and collaboration among allies are fundamental in pursuing the operational and strategic objectives defined by the

⁸⁷ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 183-185, 195, 586-589.

political authority. In this sense, unity of effort, effective trust, and synergic mechanisms represent key elements in applying coalition warfare.

In the case of the Axis, the coalition of Italy and Germany presented several issues. The evident drawbacks in the political, economic, and societal realms exacerbated the limitations of the Italian military forces. The deficit in resources, limited coordination among the services, and an overall poor military culture constituted additional weaknesses. Transposed into an alliance with Germany, ideological and cultural differences, an overall lack of trust, and the absence of primary coordination mechanisms undermined the relationship between Italian and German commands.

Diverging ideological and cultural perspectives constituted one of the primary issues of the Axis, especially on the Eastern Front. Although the alliance relied on an ideological framework, Germans and Italians diverged in their efforts to pursue it. Russia represented for Hitler the centerpiece of his overall strategy. The defeat of Soviet Union would ensure the isolation of Britain, unlimited economic resources, especially in the area of the Urals, and most important, the annihilation of “Jewish Bolshevism,” the pivotal threat to the German race.⁸⁸ On his part, *Il Duce* conceived war as the key element of Fascism, and he believed that the subsequent empire from Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf, built by force of arms, would make Italy a great power.⁸⁹ Therefore, the decision to join the Germans on the Eastern Front altered Mussolini’s strategy significantly. Italy had no major interests regarding a military operation against the Soviet Union, but Mussolini was keen to secure an Italian involvement in Operation Barbarossa, since playing a role on the

⁸⁸ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 920; DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 92-93. Bocca, *Storia d’Italia nella guerra fascista*, 319-323.

⁸⁹ Ciano, *Diario*, 13 November 1937, 33; Mussolini, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 29, 403-405.

Eastern Front would have leveraged the share of the postwar settlement. Thus, he sought to apply the strategy of the decisive weight.⁹⁰

Furthermore, Mussolini and Hitler each presented an erratic character that affected their relationship and the subsequent ideas. Hitler had a profound attraction to Mussolini for his leading personality in Italy and the Fascist ideology, but, at the same time, he disdained Italian military ineffectiveness and the cumbersome monarchy.⁹¹ For his part, Mussolini “disliked Hitler personally,” but he recognized the emergence of Germany as a pivotal element on the European chessboard.⁹² Although Mussolini suffered a severe opposition within the *Comando Supremo*—personalities such as Badoglio and Balbo called for Italy to pursue a parallel war in accordance with vital national interests—several considerations made an alliance with Germany necessary.⁹³ First, despite diverging ideologies, Mussolini and Hitler shared the common idea of a vigorous nationalist imperialism, representing a fundamental base for dialogue and cooperation.⁹⁴ Second, a coalition with the powerful Germany would represent a valid reason for the Fascist regime to exercise its power against the primary actors in the Italian Peninsula, namely the monarch, the industrialists, and the Vatican.⁹⁵ Third, the alliance between Italy and Germany relied on the situational understanding of the relative strengths of the European countries—the emergent Germany against

⁹⁰ Fenyo, “The Allied Axis Armies and Stalingrad,” 60.

⁹¹ F. W. Deakin, *The Brutal Friendship: Mussolini, Hitler, and the Fall of Italian Fascism* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 206; Burkhardt Müller-Hillenbrand, *Germany and its Allies in World War II: A Record of Axis Collaboration Problems* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), 145-146.

⁹² Pietro Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War: Memoirs and Documents* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1948), 2.

⁹³ DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 37. Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 342. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 88-89.

⁹⁴ DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 26.

⁹⁵ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 239-241.

the declining Great Britain and France.⁹⁶

Lastly, the Axis was ineffective “because Italians and Germans were culturally and spiritually poles apart.”⁹⁷ In Germany, military culture constantly emphasized the concept of the fighting spirit. Military theorists such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Ernst Moritz Arndt, and Carl von Clausewitz contributed to encouraging this aspect. Fichte and Arndt argued that the German spirit for war was more authentic, original, and deeper than in all other countries.⁹⁸ This spirit went beyond a matter of mathematical consideration, as the spirit of the German people—*Volksgeist*—represented the primary factor in leveraging “a victory of the soul against overwhelming numbers.”⁹⁹ Similarly, Clausewitz argued, “Military spirit … is one of the most important moral elements in war.” He emphasized that the prerequisites for this spirit were “a series of victorious wars” and “frequent exertions of the army to the utmost limits of its strength.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, throughout the history of Germany, fighting spirit became the linchpin of military culture and translated into the dictates of comradeship and initiative at all levels. Therefore, the German Army emphasized the role of war as a necessity in which obedience leveraged subordinates to act autonomously on the battlefield since they possessed a unique German fighting spirit. Trust between the higher and lower levels of leadership would enable quick decisions on the battlefield without an explicit order.

Conversely, in Italy, the lack of great leaders such as Frederick the Great and Bismarck, and of a history of military victories hindered the development of any fighting spirit. In this sense,

⁹⁶ Ciano, *Diario*, 12 December 1937, 43; Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 194-195.

⁹⁷ Franco Maugeri, *From the Ashes of Disgrace* ed. Victor Rosen (New York, NY: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1948), 8.

⁹⁸ McGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and Nationalist Socialist Dictatorships*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 48.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 173.

¹⁰⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 189.

historians Giorgio Rochat, Giorgio Boccia, and Mario Montinari argued that the lack of a genuine national military culture reflected the values expressed by the Italian society.¹⁰¹ Since the *Risorgimento*, the Army represented an unpopular institution because the conscription of farmers and peasants threatened the survival of farms, families, and communities.¹⁰² Further, following the First World War, “workers felt betrayed by the government that had drafted them and for whom they fought in the war. They did not love the Fatherland, because the Fatherland had sent them to the trenches, giving them no better life after the war.”¹⁰³ Consequently, the army remained an unpopular institution, because it was the most concrete symbol of the state. Additionally, military defeats in Ethiopia in 1896 and in the First World War did not enhance the credibility of military leadership. Although in 1917, Giovanni Giolitti, Italian Prime Minister, stated that Italians sent for two generations “their most stupid sons into the Army because they did not know what to do with them,” the Italian Army mirrored the cultural characterization of the Italian society with its flaws and virtues.¹⁰⁴

With the advent of Fascism, the situation did not change. Despite Mussolini’s efforts to change cultural values of the Italians through the war, “Italy has never seemed well inclined towards arms In reality, one must admit that Italy has never been well-inclined toward the state,

¹⁰¹ Bocca, *Storia d’Italia nella guerra fascista*, 105; Giorgio Rochat, *L’esercito italiano da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1967), 3; Mario Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, vol. 1 (Rome, Italy: Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1996), viii.

¹⁰² *Risorgimento* or Italian unification was the political and social movement that led to the kingdom of Italy in 1861. Lucy Riall, “Men at War: Masculinity and Military Ideals in the Risorgimento,” in *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 153.

¹⁰³ Ciro Paoletti, *A Military History of Italy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 154.

¹⁰⁴ Gooch, *Army, State, and Society in Italy*, 173; MacGregor Knox, “The First World War and Military Culture: Continuity and Change in Germany and Italy,” in *Imperial Germany Revisited*, ed. Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2011), 216; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 163-166; Olindo Malagodi, *Conversazioni della guerra 1914-1919*, ed. Brunello Vigezzi (Milan, Italy: Riccardo Ricciardi editore, 1960), 199-201.

whatever its leadership.”¹⁰⁵ From the military perspective, the influence exercised by the Fascist government through nationalist propaganda did not achieve the expected results. The military never completely embraced Fascist dictates, and promotion of general officers continued to rely on seniority rather than merit. Even when Mussolini replaced many of them, it was necessary for the regime to safeguard the political and popular support of the dictatorship rather than to use such appointments as an effective recognition of merit.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, on the Eastern Front, the decision to assign the command of the ARMIR to General Italo Gariboldi represented a glaringly clear example. General Gariboldi, who had previously fought in the African theater with poor results, became ARMIR commander due to his seniority and close relationship with General Cavallero, Army Chief of the General Staff. Conversely, the meritorious General Messe, CSIR commander, who had a great deal of experience on the Eastern Front and had gained the trust of his men, had to leave the theater.¹⁰⁷

The concept of morality had a significant role in the cultural, military realm. Although the German necessity of war acquired the essence of an offensive “all or nothing” struggle for the conquest of a universal hegemony, therefore neglecting moral and legal restraints, the Italian military, since the *Risorgimento*, based its actions on moral justification.¹⁰⁸ In the Second World War, and specifically on the Eastern Front, Italian soldiers did not have a satisfactory reason for fighting. Despite an initial enthusiasm due to the Fascist propaganda, Italians considered that far away theater as “profitless.” Historian Maugeri argued, “The only reason, the only justification for

¹⁰⁵ Mario Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane*, viii.

¹⁰⁶ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 169-177; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 184, 589-593; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 387-395; Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 319-329, 356-364.

¹⁰⁸ Knox, *To the Threshold of Power 1922/33*, 48, 103.

taking part would be given if either England or Germany made a move to occupy our territory. Then, and only then, should we have taken up the sword.”¹⁰⁹ On the Soviet territory, this necessity did not exist, since a crusade against Bolshevism and Judaism never really penetrated the Italian population and military mentality.¹¹⁰ For the Italians, the idea of nationalism referred solely to the defense of their own borders. Therefore, an invasion of foreign countries was harder to prove as a moral, justified cause for war. Italians never recognized and accepted the value of a war against the Soviets.¹¹¹ A lack of enthusiasm for the war was evident even in the North African and Mediterranean theaters of war, but it reached the lowest level on the Eastern Front. Conversely, the German leaders did not understand this emotional aspect among their allies. German soldiers emphasized the ideological, military necessity of war, which leveraged the fighting spirit in conducting an offensive warfare without moral and legal constraints for the goals of the nation.¹¹²

An overall lack of trust between Germany and Italy was an additional element of weakness in coalition warfare. This aspect had deep roots and evolved into dramatic consequences. Mistrust between Germany and Italy had begun before Italy had even joined the war and fostered misinterpretations. The letter that Hitler sent to the Italian government in July 1939, concerning the upcoming war with Poland, was a clear example. War with the Polish was “a purely Nordic matter and Germany is able to handle it by herself. Italy, in fact, is not involved, and in addition, her military preparations are only just beginning so her intervention would not mean any substantial help. Italy therefore should remain at peace and merely give us proofs of her friendship.”¹¹³ In

¹⁰⁹ Maugeri, *From the Ashes of Disgrace*, 9.

¹¹⁰ DiNardo, “Dysfunctional Coalition,” 175.

¹¹¹ Ceva, *Le forze armate*, 358-360.

¹¹² Knox, *To the Threshold of Power 1922/33*, 103.

¹¹³ Pietro Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War*, 6-7.

response, Mussolini, misjudging the real meaning of the letter and offended by the exclusion of Italy in the German war plans, ordered the fortification of the Italo-German border. Mussolini's judgment that Hitler slighted Italy was consistent within the memoirs of several other members of the Italian government. For instance, Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, argued that German secretiveness not only exacerbated mistrust between the two dictators, but it negatively affected relationships at every diplomatic and military level.¹¹⁴ Clear examples of this attitude were evident during the Brenner Pass meeting on March 18, 1940, when Hitler did not mention the imminent attack on Norway and France, and on April 4, 1940, during the staff talks between *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) and *Comando Supremo*.¹¹⁵ Even the Tripartite Pact, signed on September 27, 1940, in Berlin by Germany, Italy, and Japan, pledging the three countries to provide military, political, and economic aid to each other in case of an external attack, did not represent a privileged channel to enhance information sharing between the two allies. Racial considerations played a significant role in explaining the Germans' lack of trust toward the Italian counterpart.¹¹⁶ German general officers such as Field Marshall Albert Kesselring frequently characterized the Italians in racial terms, arguing that the Italian "species" was inferior and demonstrated behaviors that were "in sharp contrast with the characteristics of people from the North [of Europe]."¹¹⁷ Similarly, Hitler misjudged Italian history and military, basing his assumptions about the race on Nazi standards. He referred to Italians as a "soft" people, void of that

¹¹⁴ Ciano, *Diario*, 11 August 1939, 281.

¹¹⁵ Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter* (New York, NY: Macmillan Company, 1951), 172; DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 35. Ciano, *Diario*, 17-20 March 1940, 358-360; Richard J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London, UK: Arnold, 2002), 280-282.

¹¹⁶ Richard L. DiNardo and Daniel J. Hughes, "Germany and Coalition Warfare in the World Wars: A Comparative Study," *War in History* 8, no.2 (April 2001), 188.

¹¹⁷ Albert Kesselring, "Italy as Military Ally," in *World War II German Military Studies: A Collection of 213 Special Reports on the Second World War Prepared by Former Officers of the Wehrmacht for the United States Army*, vol. 14, ed. Donald S. Detwiler, Jürgen Rohwer, and Charles B. Burdick (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1979), 5.

aggressive and enthusiastic fighting spirit of the Germans and, consequently, as incapable fighters, responsible for German military failure.¹¹⁸ Thus, German leadership, assessing the Italians as unworthy of their trust, avoided sharing future intentions and plans with the Italian ally.¹¹⁹

The untrusting relationship between Germany and Italy was evident prior the beginning of Operation Barbarossa and throughout the operation. During the meeting at the Brenner Pass on June 2, 1941, Hitler discussed several aspects of the broad conflict, such as the progress in the Mediterranean and the impelling necessity of raw materials, but not the imminent invasion of the Soviet Union. Similarly, General Cavallero and Field Marshal Keitel discussed matters related to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, but without mentioning a possible operation on the Eastern Front.¹²⁰ Although General Efisio Marras, Italian military attaché in Berlin, on June 14, 1941, informed Mussolini that German planners had war-gamed an attack on the Soviet Union, whose objects were Leningrad, Moscow, and Odessa, *Il Duce* received the definitive assurance of the invasion through a letter from Hitler only on the eve of the attack, June 21, 1941.¹²¹

Trust did not improve throughout the operation, and it translated into inadequate coalition mechanisms. Although each branch of the German Army should have operated with its respective counterpart in Finland, Hungary, Romania, and Italy, in reality cooperation and dialogue did not occur. Indeed, the OKW did not establish mechanisms that would enable a coordinated planning process among all countries involved in Operation Barbarossa.¹²² This lack of coalition mechanisms

¹¹⁸ Hitler's *Table Talk 1941-1944*, trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York, NY: Enigma Books, 2000), 9, 116-117, 660-661; Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, ed. and trans. Anthony G. Powell (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), 293, 342-344, 379.

¹¹⁹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 744-747.

¹²⁰ Cavallero, *Diario*, 192; Ciano, *Diario*, 2 June 1941, 464.

¹²¹ Cavallero, *Diario*, 188, 200; Ciano, *Diario*, 22 June 1941, 470.

¹²² Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 8.

was evident in particular between Germans and Italians on the Eastern Front. The relationship between the CSIR and the German commands was detrimental. Although on several occasions General Messe requested clarification from the higher German commands concerning current and future activities for the Italian forces, he never received an adequate assessment of the situation nor clear intentions for follow-on operations. This aspect led the Italian forces to rely on fragmented information that hindered the decision-making process. At the same time, German commands refused to adapt their plans and the inherent objectives to the capabilities of their allies. Critical issues in terms of overextended and thin logistic flow, the extensive width of the defensive sectors, and the scarcity of armored and motorized vehicles among the allies did not affect the German plans. Tactical considerations prevailed over logistics and moral aspects.¹²³

With the deployment of the ARMIR, the coalition relationship with the German commands worsened due to the vagueness of the assigned missions and the frequent changes of command. The employment of the Alpini Corps is emblematic. Originally selected for its good reputation when the Caucasus region was not an objective in the German plans, the Alpini Corps began its deployment toward the Eastern Front on July 14, 1942, without a clear mission. Only on August 6, did they receive the order to move to the Caucasus region under the command of German Army Group A, but on August 19, the corps eventually received the order to join the rest of the ARMIR under German Army Group B on the Don River. Thus, in addition to inadequate equipment and limited capabilities in terms of armored and motorized vehicles, the Alpine Corps had to march for several weeks before catching up with the other forces in the Russian plain. This aspect contributed to negatively affecting the effectiveness and morale of the troops.¹²⁴

¹²³ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 123, 145.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 305; Typical mountainous troops, the Alpini Corps deployed with 15,000 mules, light weapons and artillery, and limited motorized vehicles. Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, 378-383.

Furthermore, lack of coordination was evident in the numerous changes of command of the Italian units. Initially and frequently, the German commands employed the Italian divisions separately, contrasting with the desired unity of command advocated by the Italian military in previous agreements between the two countries.¹²⁵ Moreover, when employed unitarily, the CSIR transitioned from the German Eleventh Army to the First Panzer Group under General von Kleist on August 14, 1941, and then to the German Seventeenth Army in June 1942. Eventually, the ARMIR transitioned from Army Group A to Army Group B on July 23, 1942.¹²⁶ These changes worsened the coordination of the two commands, since the military forces presented different capabilities and equipment. For instance, under the First Panzer Group, considered one of the most mobile units in the German Army, the two partly motorized Italian divisions encountered several issues in keeping up with the Germans.¹²⁷ Lastly, for employing the German units under its command, the ARMIR command had to submit a request to the higher German command, delaying *de facto* the pace of the operations.¹²⁸

An additional element of weakness in establishing coalition mechanisms was the lack of liaison elements and interpreters. The limited military collaboration between the two countries relied on the respective military attachés in Berlin and Rome, and on merely service-based liaison organizations. General Marras deployed to the OKW while General von Rintelen operated in the *Comando Supremo*. The latter provided General Rintelen daily briefings, although the German general officer unrealistically blamed the Italian attitude for not providing sufficient information

¹²⁵ Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 86, 164.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 90, 208, 643-644.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 104. DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 127-129.

¹²⁸ Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 461.

related to the strength of the armed forces and their operative plans. On the other hand, General Marras, despite his deployment to the OKW, was often absent during the main briefings. Therefore, the relationship between the German and Italian commands with the military attachés rested on a mistrustful basis, limiting *de facto* an efficient sharing of information and effective cooperation.¹²⁹

Additionally, limited service-based liaison organizations represented the only way to share information during the conduct of the operation. Although the Operations Branch of the OKH received reports from subordinate headquarters and liaison staffs, and then disseminated a daily summary of events down to corps and sometimes to the divisional level on the Eastern Front, the analysis of information remained limited.¹³⁰ Specifically, German commands ignored recommendations provided by the Italian subordinate units. The Italian forces relied on the binary division, and were therefore not adequate in terms of strength and materiel to effectively oppose the Soviet attack. General Garibaldi repeatedly made requests to adapt the disposition of units to conform with the terrain, gaining a better position on higher ground, but the German command constantly refused to vary the plan. The order remained to conduct a static defense along the 270-kilometer line according to the original plan.¹³¹

Lastly, language barriers and limited interpreters resulted in the inability to communicate effectively between Italy and Germany. Although German officers received foreign language training in French and English during their academic formation, most of the Italian officers did not possess any language skills.¹³² Only some Italian general officers were conversant in French or

¹²⁹ Lucio Ceva, *La condotta italiana della guerra: Cavallero e il Comando Supremo 1941/1942* (Milan, Italy: Feltrinelli Editore, 1975), 34; DiNardo, *Germany and the Axis Powers*, 38.

¹³⁰ Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 158.

¹³¹ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 212, 244, 287, 317, 453.

¹³² DiNardo, "Dysfunctional Coalition," 714-715.

German, but the rest of the Army reflected society, whose levels of literacy and education were extremely inadequate. Indeed, the use of Italian as the national language was not so common among the Italians. These language barriers between Italians and Germans worsened the effectiveness of communication on the Eastern Front. The scant liaison officers had to rely on translators and interpreters to interact with their counterparts, but the interpreters were insufficient in number and without a perfect knowledge of military terminology. Especially with the expansion of the Italian forces, the situation became critical, since the interpreters lacked the necessary skills to convey orders effectively to the numerous subordinate units, limiting synchronization and pace of the operations.¹³³

In summary, the alliance between Germany and Italy presented several issues. Diverging cultural and ideological frameworks reflected the different appreciation of what the Soviets represented for each of the two dictators and how the concept of the German fighting spirit could overcome the limits of morality. Furthermore, an overall lack of trust based predominantly on racial considerations did not enable an effective sharing of intentions and plans, limiting *de facto* the conduct of the operations. Finally, the absence of primary coordination mechanisms such as a clear chain of command, liaison elements, and interpreters hindered the exchange of information and orders within the coalition.

Conclusion

On December 16, 1942, First Lieutenant Aurelio Mazzone watched with conscious despair the powerful Soviet counterattack crushing the few Italian defensive positions on the Don River, north of Stalingrad. Although Italian high command knew that the Soviets were going to attack,

¹³³ DiNardo, “Dysfunctional Coalition,” 716.

they neglected to prepare the defenders for what was to come. Eventually, Mazzone and a few survivors from his battery were able to escape the Soviet encirclement. In this drama, he witnessed and suffered the repercussions of several limitations existing at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. In depicting an imaginary bridge that overcame the fragmentary and limited accounts of the Italian historiography and the broad English production, this monograph has sought to support, with historical facts, the thesis that the Italian expedition in the Russian campaign failed for reasons that went beyond the solely military aspect. Although the latter played a significant role, the defeat on the Eastern Front encompassed several interconnected aspects.

As a nation, Italy lacked essential elements of national support such as a clear political guidance, adequate economic resources, and an effective societal support. Implications of these limitations emerged in the controversial decision of Mussolini to join the German ally on the Eastern Front. Although Italy had no real interest regarding a possible operation in the Soviet Union, Mussolini repeatedly expressed the necessity of playing a role on the Eastern Front to share the victory in the postwar settlement. In addition to divergent and therefore conflicting interests of several stakeholders in the Italian Peninsula, Mussolini's decision to deviate from the Mediterranean-centered strategy posed additional friction, especially among the military. From the economic perspective, the lack of raw materials and a poor industrial base exacerbated the difficulties in the Soviet environment. Additionally, the lack of enthusiasm for fighting in such a distant theater crushed the already low morale of the troops.

Furthermore, the Italian armed forces reflected limited resources, inadequate modernization, scarce coordination and cooperation among services, and poor military culture. In particular, the limited shares of the national budget and the absence of an effective centralized coordination among the services hindered the development of structures, weapons, and equipment. Further, rigidity in doctrine and scarce attention to the lessons of previous combat experiences

constituted an additional element of weakness in the overall system. These factors played a pivotal role, particularly in the alien environment on the Eastern Front.

Finally, the alliance between Germany and Italy presented several issues. Diverging cultural and ideological perspectives led the two dictators to frame the Soviet Union in different ways. In this sense, Mussolini misunderstood the ideological extent of Hitler's aspiration in solving the Soviet affair. The Fascist regime lacked the ideological coherence and conviction to generate the same German fanaticism in Italian troops, in particular for a campaign on the Eastern Front that did not represent any symbolic meaning for Italians or even for Mussolini.¹³⁴ Additionally, an overall lack of trust, based predominantly on racial considerations, did not enable an efficient sharing of intentions and plans, limiting *de facto* the conduct of the operations. Lastly, the absence of primary coordination mechanisms such as an appropriate chain of command, sufficient liaison elements, and interpreters hindered the effective exchange of information and orders within the coalition.

The historical example of the Italian expedition on the Eastern Front provides several relevant considerations for the contemporary military planner. First, planners should analyze the operational environment from a holistic perspective. Focusing on the solely military framework hinders the appreciation of several interconnected aspects, limiting the overall understanding of the situation, both internally and externally.¹³⁵ Specifically, from the internal perspective, the exiguous resources of the Italian forces on the Eastern Front—armored and motorized vehicles, equipment,

¹³⁴ Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 4; MacGregor Knox, "Expansionist Zeal, Fighting Power, and Staying Power in the Italian and German Dictatorships," in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 131; Quirino Armellini, *Diario di guerra. Nove mesi al Comando Supremo* (Milan, Italy: Garzanti, 1946), 48.

¹³⁵ Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 5-0.1, *Army Design Methodology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015), 1-4, 3-1 – 3-6; Bryan Lawson, *How Designers Think: The Design Process Demystified* (Amsterdam, NL: Architectural Press, 2006), 90-109.

and supplies—constituted the primary issues at the tactical level. In reality, the Italian “system” lacked an overarching support at the political and strategic levels, concerning political guidance and clear strategic objectives, adequate economic resources for modernizing the military instrument, and an effective involvement of the population. Additionally, at the operational level, the military failed to learn the lessons of previous combat experiences and to adapt to the new type of warfare. These aspects led to rigidity in doctrine and in the decision-making process, and to a limited coordination among the services. Thus, the limitations at the tactical level represented only the tip of the iceberg. Planners should approach the analysis of the operational environment as a system in which actors at different levels—political, strategic, operational, and tactical—and the inherent relationships among them enable the emergence of new patterns that can leverage the overall understanding.¹³⁶

In transitioning to the external perspective, the diverging interests of the same stakeholders in the Italian arena—the monarchy, the dictatorship, the Church, and the industrial elite—did not match with the international expectations of a coalition with Germany.¹³⁷ Not recognizing the significant ideological, cultural, and economic differences between Italy and Germany, Mussolini’s decision to join Operation Barbarossa altered the already precarious balance. From the military perspective, the decision obliged the *Stato Maggiore Generale* to divert military forces from the Mediterranean theater and direct them onto the Eastern Front. Thus, the two services—*Regia*

¹³⁶ Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: The Natural Philosophy of the New Developments in the Sciences* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1972), 74-75; Alex Ryan, *What Is A System Approach?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), 27-29, accessed February 03, 2017, <http://arxiv.org/pdf/0809.1698.pdf>.

¹³⁷ Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games,” in *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 427-460, accessed February 23, 2017, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706785?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

Marina and *Regia Aeronautica*—involved in the Mediterranean theater, lacked a significant support from the Army.

From the external perspective, Italian military leadership and staffs did not effectively analyze the Soviets. Specifically, the lack of understanding of the enemy regarding capabilities, intentions, and plans was, again, the result of poor military culture. Indeed, the erratic leadership of Mussolini played a significant role. Although since November 1940 correspondences between Italy and Germany, through the military attachés and the two dictators themselves, depicted some elements of the German plan in solving the Soviet problem, Mussolini issued orders to prepare an expeditionary force only on May 30, 1941, just a few weeks before the German attack.¹³⁸ At the same time, numerous military leaders showed a lack of initiative—a typical aspect of a rigid hierarchy—that hindered the process of analysis, learning, and adaptation.

The process of analysis, learning, and adaptation leads to the second consideration. Planners should continuously analyze the matching of ways and means with the strategic ends. In this sense, an effective dialogue between politics and military can limit the risks of developing infeasible plans, leading to a dramatic defeat. On the Eastern Front, the Italian forces lacked clear strategic guidance. Questionable reasons led the Italians to the Don River, but there is no evidence in the archives that the military leadership opposed the intervention, despite the evident weaknesses of the military instrument.¹³⁹ Additionally, the example of General Messe is emblematic. Perfectly aware of the situation on the battlefield, in a conversation with Mussolini, he strenuously opposed the deployment of the ARMIR on the Eastern Front. Lessons learned during the first year of the Russian campaign should have been sufficient arguments to negate the implementation of the

¹³⁸ Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 34-35.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 503-516.

expedition, but *Il Duce* followed his own agenda.¹⁴⁰ In this sense, planners and their commanders should enable an effective dialogue to constantly question the matching of ends, ways, and means.

The third consideration concerns how planners should consider the importance of cultural and military values both internally, as members of a coalition, and externally, such as the enemy. Intangible elements such as the fighting spirit, enthusiasm, and morality are pivotal elements in any conflict.¹⁴¹ In this sense, Italy and Germany presented significant differences. For the average Italian, survival meant defending the national borders from foreign invaders. When Mussolini changed this rhetoric to expand the national borders to the Mediterranean Sea, the Italian soldier accepted the rationale behind the decision, since it related to the overarching defense of the country. Conversely, the shift onto the Eastern Front certainly did not have anything to do with the concept of national survival. Therefore, Italian soldiers, not having a real interest in fighting along the Don or in the Caucasus, lost morale and enthusiasm.¹⁴² The latter was also difficult to generate because many Italians did not have faith in Mussolini's leadership in the same way that many Germans had faith in Hitler. Similarly, the senior military leaders had the same objections. General Messe reflected on the lack of enthusiasm on the Eastern Front when he argued that the Italian soldier was "listening suspiciously to too many speeches designed to convince him of what he cannot and does not want to accept: justice and the needs of the war."¹⁴³ In this sense, Mussolini failed to convince the Italians that involvement in the Russian campaign had any kind of moral justification. In summary, Italian soldiers lacked what Clausewitz defined as "hostile feelings." Although the necessities of the war called for hostile intentions toward the Soviet Union, Italian troops did not

¹⁴⁰ Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, *Le Operazioni delle Unità Italiane al Fronte Russo 1941-43*, 183-185, 195, 586-589.

¹⁴¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, 136-138.

¹⁴² DiNardo and Hughes, "Germany and Coalition Warfare in the World Wars," 189.

¹⁴³ Messe, *La Guerra al Fronte Russo*, 204.

see Soviets as a threat. In recognizing that the Soviets were defending their territory—the same moral justification the Italians normally used—they did not express the violence, revenge, and retaliation typical of a fighting army.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, military officers should understand the importance of fighting spirit, morale, and morality as key elements to define the nature of the internal and external relationships.

Lastly, planners should consider efficient mechanisms to improve cooperation and information sharing within a coalition. Specifically, tenets such as mission focus, respect, rapport, knowledge of partner, and patience play a significant role in developing trust among the members.¹⁴⁵ Germany and Italy presented none of them. Differences in how Germans and Italians approached the Eastern Front emphasized the lack of unity of effort in developing a unified, stable chain of command. Additionally, racial considerations undermined an effective dialogue between German and Italian commands, limiting *de facto* the development of confidence and trust. Eventually, the lack of liaison elements and interpreters within the coalition posed an additional hindrance in creating a shared understanding of the operational environment and the agents acting on the same side of the chessboard.

In conclusion, in depicting an imaginary bridge between the fragmentary accounts of the Italian historiography and the broad English production on the Second World War, this monograph aims at analyzing the reasons why the Italian expedition in Russia failed. In encompassing the political, cultural, and military perspectives, the monograph provides current and future planners with several lessons concerning the framing of the operational environment, the importance of intangible values in war, and the necessity of adequate mechanisms within a coalition.

¹⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 137-139.

¹⁴⁵ Joint Publication (JP) 3-16, *Multinational Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), I-3 – I-4.

Glossary

Archivio Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Archive of the Historical Office of the Italian Army General Staff

Archivio Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore della Marina. Archive of the Historical Office of the Italian Navy General Staff

Armata Italiana in Russia (ARMIR). Italian Eighth Army

Comando Supremo. Italian Armed Forces High Command

Corpo di spedizione italiana in Russia (CSIR). Italian Expeditionary Force in Russia

Duce. Benito Mussolini

Luftwaffe. German Air Force

Oberkommando der Heeres (OKH). German Army High Command

Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW). German High Command Staff

Peso determinante. Strategy of the decisive weight

Regia Aeronautica. Royal (Italian) Air Force

Regio Esercito. Royal (Italian) Army

Regia Marina. Royal (Italian) Navy

Risorgimento. It was the political and social movement that led to the kingdom of Italy in 1861

Stato Maggiore Generale (SMG). Italian Joint Staff

Appendix A: Chronology

Date	Events of the Second World War in 1941-43	Events related to the Italian forces on the Eastern Front
18 December 1940		Hitler issues the directive for Operation Barbarossa
19-21 January 1941	Hitler and Mussolini meet at Berchtesgaden. Mussolini finally agrees to German aid in North Africa. Mussolini's <i>guerra parallela</i> ended	
22 January 1941	British forces seize Tobruk, a vital Libyan port and continue to attack Italian forces in retreat	
7 February 1941	British offensive into Libya terminates. Remnants of Italian X Army surrender. 130,000 Italian prisoners during the British campaign. Great Britain is in possession of Eastern Libya	
11 February 1941	British forces attack Italian Somaliland	
12-14 February 1941	General Erwin Rommel and German Army units arrive in Tripoli, Libya to form the basis of the <i>Afrika Korps</i>	
7 March 1941	British forces arrive and reinforce Greece	
9 March 1941	Italian offensive in Albania designed to penetrate Greek defenses fails	
24 March 1941	General Rommel, against the wishes of the German and Italian Army Staffs begins an offensive in North Africa	
27 March 1941	British forces break through Italian defenses in Eritrea	
6 April 1941	Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece. Addis Ababa, capital of Ethiopia, falls to British forces	
10 April 1941	Rommel's <i>Afrika Korps</i> lays siege to Tobruk in Eastern Libya	
17 April 1941	Yugoslavia capitulates	
20 April 1941	Greece capitulates	
29 April 1941	British forces are withdrawn from Greece after highly successful German invasion	
15 May 1941	Operation Brevity begins (the British counterattack in Egypt)	

15-17 June 1941	Rommel defeats British counteroffensive aimed at relieving Tobruk	
22 June 1941		Germany attacks the Soviet Union
July 1941		CSIR joins German Army Group South
August 1941	U.S. announces an oil embargo against aggressor states	CSIR pursues retreating Soviets between the Bug River and Dniester River
September 1941		Germans take Kiev and siege of Leningrad begins; CSIR wins Battle of Petrikowka
2 October 1941		Germans begin their final drive towards Moscow
16/20 October 1941		Germans take Odessa. Italian forces occupy Stalino
18 November 1941	Great Britain begins second offensive in Libya. British forces drive Rommel's <i>Afrika Korps</i> back into Western Libya	
5 December 1941		Germany abandons its attack on Moscow. Soviet Red Army forces mount a winter counterattack around Moscow
7 December 1941	Japan bombed the U.S. fleet in Pearl Harbor	
11 December 1941	Germany and Italy declare war on the United States	
19 December 1941	Hitler takes personal command of the German Army	
25 December 1941		Christmas Battle. Italy wins with the support of German forces
21 January 1942	Rommel begins his second offensive and drives the British forces back into Eastern Libya just west of Tobruk	
29 April 1942	Hitler and Mussolini along with Count Ciano, Marshal Ugo Cavallero, and Field Marshal Keitel meet in Salzburg. All agree that Tobruk should be seized before the invasion of Malta	
26 May 1942	Rommel begins his third offensive in Libya	
20 June 1942	Tobruk falls to the <i>Afrika Korps</i> . Rommel continues his offensive and derails Italo-German plans to invade Malta. The <i>Afrika Korps</i> advances into Egypt and halts at El Alamein.	

28 June 1942		German forces begin their second great offensive in the Eastern Front aimed at seizing vital oil resources in the Caucasus
July 1942		Germans begin a drive toward Stalingrad; ARMIR deploys on the Eastern Front
15-27 July 1942	British forces counterattack the <i>Afrika Korps</i> but fail to achieve a breakthrough. Rommel's forces, however, sustain heavy losses	
12 August 1942	Stalin and Churchill meet in Moscow	Soviet counterattack on the Italian sector. First Defensive Battle of the Don
31 August 1942	Rommel attempts to break British defenses at Alam Haifa. <i>Afrika Korps</i> offensive fails disastrously	
13 September 1942		Battle of Stalingrad begins
4 November 1942	British forces under General Sir Montgomery break through and destroy the <i>Afrika Korps</i> defenses at El Alamein	
8 November 1942	Operation Torch. Anglo-American forces land in North Africa, seizing French Morocco and Algeria	
9 November 1942	Italo-German forces land in Tunisia	
19 November 1942		Operation Uranus. The Soviet Red Army begins its counteroffensive around Stalingrad
23 November 1942	The <i>Afrika Korps</i> retreats from Eastern Libya	
11 December 1942		Soviets launch Operation Saturn
16 December 1942		Soviets launch Operation Little Saturn against ARMIR
18 December 1942	Count Ciano and Marshal Cavallero meet with Hitler. An agreement is reached to defend Tunisia	
19 December 1942		ARMIR headquarters orders the withdrawal
2 January 1943		German forces withdraw from the Caucasus
14 January 1943	Casablanca conference between Churchill and Roosevelt	Soviets attack Alpini Corps
23 January 1943	Montgomery's Eighth Army takes Tripoli	

26 January 1943		Battle of Nikolajewka. The Alpini remnants breach the Soviet encirclement
2 February 1943		German forces surrender at Stalingrad
3 February 1943	The last Italian forces leave Libya	
26 March 1943	Italian forces hold against British attacks in Southeastern Tunisia, but forced to withdraw when threatened by US forces in the West	
7 April 1943		Mussolini and Hitler meet at Klessheim. Hitler insists on continuing the war against the Soviet Union
13 May 1943	Italo-German forces surrender in North Africa	
10 July 1943	Anglo-American forces land in Sicily	
12 July 1943		German Kursk offensive in the Soviet Union fails. Germany now on the operational defensive in the Eastern Front
19 July 1943	Allies bomb Rome	
25 July 1943	King Victor Emmanuel III dismisses Mussolini and has him arrested. The new Prime Minister, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, begins secret negotiations with the Allies to surrender	
8 September 1943	Italy surrenders to the Allies. Anglo-American forces invade Italian mainland	
12 September 1943	Germans rescue Mussolini.	
23 September 1943	Mussolini, with German support, creates the Italian Socialist Republic in Northern Italy.	
13 October 1943	Italy declares war on Germany	
28 November 1943	Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin meet at Teheran	

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